

Caving in Virginia and the COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Pandemic

Virginia Cave Board, May 15, 2020

Governor Northam's Executive Order 61 has revised the guidance in Executive Order 55 that directed all Virginians to stay home except in extremely limited circumstances. Although some closures on certain businesses, fitness and exercise facilities, and campgrounds have eased, restrictions are still in place due to the ongoing pandemic, and physical social distancing measures are still in place. Further details and updates on current state orders related to the COVID-19 epidemic may be found at <https://www.virginia.gov/coronavirus/>.

At this time, the Cave Board discourages caving for the following reasons:

- 1) Caving is a group activity that takes place in an enclosed, poorly ventilated space and is in many cases difficult to undertake while complying with current social distancing recommendations. People caving together are likely to come into close contact with each other in a confined space and getting to caves may require significant travel and interaction with other members of the public, especially landowners.
- 2) In addition to concerns over spread of COVID-19 within the human population, scientists with the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) and other organizations are currently investigating the potential for the virus to be transmitted from humans to bats or other wildlife likely to be encountered in caves. The primary concern is that sustained infections could develop in wildlife populations that would harm wildlife and/or create a wildlife reservoir for the human pathogen. Because of this, the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (DGIF) issued the following statement:

DGIF Temporarily Closes Access to Caves on Agency Lands: Due to the potential for infected people to transfer the virus to bats, DGIF is temporarily closing access to caves on agency lands. While DGIF does not have regulatory authority over cave access other than on agency lands, we ask that you consider refraining from accessing caves where bats roost until the assessment of the risk that COVID-19 poses to North American bats is completed. (<https://www.dgif.virginia.gov/covid-19/>)

As restrictions such as those in Executive Order 55 eventually ease and caving activity resumes, be aware of landowners' concerns in regards to COVID-19. We strongly recommend that cavers not initiate face to face contact with landowners and refrain from visiting new private landowners to look for caves until such contact is consistent with both state law and the US Centers for Disease Control guidelines.